

Lucid Dreaming: New Age Nonsense or Therapeutic Tool?

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Abstract

The study of dreams has piqued the interest of researchers from a diverse range of fields, and lucid dreams are no exception. A lucid dream occurs when an individual becomes aware that he/she is dreaming and is then capable of changing the dream itself. Because lucid dreaming frees us from the constraints of the waking world, we are able to effect meaningful change within the dream that can transfer over to our waking lives. There is a considerable amount of research on this topic, but the concept of lucid dreaming is often viewed as just another New Age pseudoscience. In order to delve further into this subject, I examine peer-reviewed literature, anecdotal sources, and my own experiences with lucid dreaming. This autoethnography will explore the possibility of utilizing lucid dreaming as a therapeutic tool for a wide variety of populations and conditions, including older adults and individuals who suffer from nightmares or PTSD.

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Introduction

Before my parents heard me say my first word, they were already very familiar with my screams. According to my mother, I would often interrupt the night's peace with my nocturnal cries, and every time this happened, my parents would rush into my room to wake me from these plaguing nightmares. I can only imagine the toll this took on my parents: being awakened every night by their infant daughter with no idea on how to resolve the issue. Although I do not remember these early night terrors, I vividly remember many dreams from my elementary years. Most of these were pleasant and intriguing, but I particularly remember having dreams in which I was being chased by zombies or other menacing creatures. This was most likely a result of watching my older brother play Resident Evil far into the night, but these dreams have persisted into young adulthood. My long history of nightmares led me to develop a paralyzing fear of the dark; I cannot remember a time in my life when I did not sleep with a night light. Sometimes I would lie awake in my bed and peer into the darkness of my closet, imagining that I saw some slight movement or bodily outline.

I do not remember the first time that I became lucid during a nightmare, but it became a common occurrence sometime in elementary school. The sequence of events during my nightmares became very routine; most of the time, I was running away from some unknown pursuer, but there were other times when I intuitively sensed that something sinister was about to happen. This was usually the point where I became lucid. Recognizing that these events could only happen in a dream, I would realize that I was in the middle of a nightmare and wake myself up by opening my eyes as wide as I could. I never thought of this act as unusual until I realized that none of my friends or family could wake themselves up from dreams, but even then, I would

not fully realize the implications of this ability. It was not until my junior year of college that I shared my nightmare wake-up technique with my boyfriend, who suggested that this might be a form of lucid dreaming.

Up until this point, I only had a vague concept of what lucid dreaming was. In my mind, lucid dreaming was just another New Age, hippie, pseudoscience that did not have more than novelty value. However, my junior year proved to be one of new experiences and knowledge that opened my mind to the idea of altered states of consciousness. After doing some research on the topic, I realized that lucid dreaming is not only a very real cognitive state, but that it has the potential to be used therapeutically with a wide variety of populations.

The goal of this autoethnographic inquiry is to holistically examine the research, both scholarly and anecdotal, surrounding lucid dreaming, and to then analyze how my own experiences fit into the entire picture. Autoethnography is an approach to social science research that attempts to meld personal and cultural experience into a cohesive whole (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Unlike other research techniques, autoethnography acknowledges the fact that humans cannot be studied objectively. Each of us carries our own subjective experiences and thoughts that unavoidably affect how we see the world. Autoethnography allows researchers to analyze how their own experiences fit into the whole picture surrounding a topic, and this provides a much deeper understanding of the topic that would not be achieved through solely objective means (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Because my own experiences with lucid dreaming are inseparable from my motivation to research this topic, it makes sense to utilize a research design that allows me to fully delve into lucid dreaming.

In this thesis, I will give a brief history and overview of lucid dreaming and then examine both the research and anecdotal literature pertaining to the benefits of lucid dreaming. In the

following section, I will provide accounts of my own lucid dreams and then analyze how my personal experience correlates with the research. I will conclude by suggesting areas for future research and giving some final thoughts on lucid dreaming's beneficial nature.

Lucid Dreaming

Throughout history, there are many examples of cultures utilizing the therapeutic power of dreams. Ancient Greeks believed that by sleeping in a sacred healing temple, a person could incubate a healing dream in which ailments could be cured or a solution revealed (Johnston, 2014). Similarly, Native Americans viewed dreams as a therapeutic way to obtain guidance and insight, as well as to communicate with helping spirits (Johnston, 2014). Dreams were also highly valued by Tibetan Buddhists, who consulted dreams to enhance health, diagnose illness, and prepare for the bardo between life and death (Johnston, 2014). Although dreams have received widespread attention in the past, the concept of lucid dreaming was not introduced until 1913 when Frederick van Eeden published his article, *A Study of Dreams*. According to van Eeden (1913), a lucid dream occurs when an individual becomes aware of their dream condition, retains memory of waking life, and changes or controls some aspect of the dream. This definition has remained largely unchanged over the years, and van Eeden's thoughts on lucid dreaming influenced a century of dream research.

Although the concept of lucid dreaming is probably not well-known to the general public, about 58% of the population has experienced a lucid dream at least once (Blagrove & Hartnell, 2000). Lucid dreaming occurs when an individual becomes aware that they are in a dream and then the dream continues past that first moment of lucidity (Doll, Gittler, & Holzinger, 2009). For many individuals, a lucid dream opens up an entirely new world in which anything is possible. Nothing is off limits: flying through the air, defeating an enemy, and creating entire

landscapes are just a few of the feats possible during a lucid dream. Whereas during waking life we are constrained by social codes and the laws of nature, lucid dreaming allows us to transgress those restrictions.

From what we currently know, lucid dreaming occurs most often during Rapid Eye Movement (REM) sleep, but can occur at any point in the sleep cycle. Lucid dreaming is a learnable skill that can be improved upon by practice and intention, but the ability to lucid dream is highly dependent upon dream recall frequency (LaBerge & DeGracia, 2000). Dream recall can be improved through various methods, such as by recording dreams in a journal upon awakening every day (Kahan & LaBerge, 1994). There is evidence that women seem to recall a greater amount of dreams when compared to men, but this difference could be due more to socialization than ability (Schredl & Reinhard, 2007). Blagrove and Hartnell (2000) examined personality traits associated with lucid dreaming and found that lucid dreamers have an internal locus of control, a higher need for cognition, and high self-assessed creativity. In addition, lucid dreamers also score well on self-confidence, self-actualization, and self-reflection (Doll, Gittler, & Holzinger, 2009). This leads to the next focus of this thesis: the benefits of lucid dreaming.

Benefits of Lucid Dreaming

While lucid dreaming is certainly an interesting human ability, the question still remains if it is actually beneficial in any way. Interest in dream research experienced a surge in the early 1900s when Sigmund Freud, father of psychoanalysis, published his work *The Interpretation of Dreams* in 1899. With the scientific community's seal of approval on the concept of dream analysis, researchers everywhere were clamoring to join the search for meaning through dream analysis. Research on lucid dreaming began to pick up in the 1970s, and today there are countless journal articles, institutes, self-help books, and organizations dedicated to the study and

practice of lucid dreaming. The following sections will cover the scientific and anecdotal research describing the benefits of lucid dreaming.

Research Literature

The benefits of lucid dreaming seem to be divided into two main categories: those that apply to anybody, and those that apply to certain populations, such as persons with mental illness. There are many benefits that anyone can tap into if they are able to lucid dream in the first place. In their study on the relationship between lucid dreaming and health, Doll, Gittler, and Holzinger (2009) found that lucid dreaming provides an ideal opportunity for individuals to gain confidence in handling challenges and practicing strategies for different situations. A long-held theory on the purpose of dreams is that they allow our minds to rehearse interactions and situations in a safe environment (LaPointe, 2004). If this holds true for non-lucid dreams, then it makes sense that lucid dreams provide us with even more opportunities for knowledge and growth because of the greater parameters of control.

One of the main benefits of lucid dreaming is that it allows dreamers to freely violate social mores that they would not normally feel comfortable breaking during waking life (LaBerge & DeGracia, 2000). Some examples of these situations could include confronting an intimidating boss, giving a speech in front of a large crowd, or going skydiving. All of these activities are things that could seem extremely daunting in waking life, and fear is what often stops us from taking these risks. Lucid dreaming provides a safe environment in which the dreamer knows that no real-life consequences will occur. This freedom can aid in overcoming anxiety, recognizing habitual patterns of social interaction, and developing self-knowledge (LaBerge & DeGracia, 2000). Research on lucid dreaming points to the idea that if we are able to

assert ourselves in a dream setting, then we can gain enough confidence to translate that ability to waking life.

Lucid dreaming has also been shown to increase autonomy, which has a significant effect on our ability to make decisions and function independently (Doll, Gittler, & Holzinger, 2009). In numerous studies, lucid dreaming has been correlated with an internal locus of control (Blagrove and Hartnell, 2000). This suggests that individuals who lucid dream are more likely to believe in the power of their own actions, and this can translate into being more proactive in taking responsibility for the future. Although lucid dreaming can be beneficial for anyone, many of these skills would be extremely valuable to utilize in a therapeutic setting. Lucid dreaming has been shown to positively influence the management of internal psychological conflicts (Doll, Gittler, & Holzinger, 2009), so it could be useful in the treatment of conditions that affect one's ability to manage their own thoughts and reactions, such as Borderline Personality Disorder.

Probably the most well-documented benefit of lucid dreaming is its effectiveness in decreasing nightmare frequency. As stated earlier, this is a problem that I personally struggled with and overcame through lucid dreaming. According to Spoormaker & van den Bout (2005), about 3% of the population suffers from frequent nightmares. In a study involving 23 nightmare sufferers, the researchers found that participants who received at least one individual or group session of Lucid Dreaming Treatment (LDT) experienced a significant reduction in nightmare frequency (Spoormaker & van den Bout, 2005). LDT teaches individuals to become lucid in a nightmare through daily exercises, such as remembering a past nightmare and then imagining how it could be changed to be less frightening. The researchers concluded that the conscious act of changing the nightmare storyline is the most important factor in reducing nightmare frequency (Spoormaker & van den Bout, 2005). When individuals rehearse the desired change during the

day and then successfully integrate this change during a nightmare, they gain control over the situation and thus gain confidence in their ability to manage conflict in the future.

While this information could be used for anybody suffering from nightmares, it is especially useful for individuals diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). PTSD symptoms include “intrusion and persistent recollection of the traumatic event, including nightmares” (Gavie & Revonsuo, 2010, p. 13). According to Gavie & Revonsuo (2010), up to 60-80% of PTSD patients suffer from nightmares, and this is only a rough estimate. Lucid dreaming has the potential to reduce nightmare frequency in PTSD sufferers by providing a safe environment in which the traumatic event can be confronted or changed. This is because lucid dreaming helps not only in reducing nightmare frequency, but also in reducing the fear associated with the original traumatic event. One study found a correlation between lucid dreaming and resilience in Israeli young adults who had been exposed to terrorism (Soffer-Dudek, Wertheim, & Shahar, 2011). However, further research in this area is needed to determine whether this relationship is due to correlation or causation.

Mota-Rolim and Araujo (2013) explain that utilizing lucid dreaming in the treatment of PTSD nightmares is extremely effective because it has limited outcomes that are all beneficial. If an individual achieves lucidity during a nightmare, there are three plausible outcomes: (1) the subject wakes up during the nightmare, (2) the subject loses fear of the nightmare due to the realization that it is only a dream, or (3) the subject changes the content of the nightmare from negative to neutral or positive (Mota-Rolim & Araujo, 2013). As an individual gains more experience in lucid dreaming, they will be less likely to wake up during the nightmare and more likely to lose their fear or change the situation to their benefit. This is extremely beneficial to PTSD sufferers because it has the potential to free them from their nighttime terrors. While it is

still unclear whether lucid dreaming has an effect on the daytime intrusion of traumatic events, it has been shown to reduce nightmare frequency. This alone can provide individuals with PTSD or general nightmares with a significant amount of relief during the night, so it should be considered for future therapeutic use.

While older adults are not a population that often comes to mind when discussing dream research, there is evidence that older adults could benefit from an increased focus on dreams. Lucid dreaming could be beneficial to older adults in many ways. Erik Erikson (1975) divided human development into separate stages that involve different tasks and goals. In older adulthood, adults are less focused on growth and goal orientation and more focused on maintenance and prevention of loss (Ebner, Freund, & Baltes, 2006). According to Ebner, Freund, & Baltes (2006), older adulthood is characterized by an increased focused on loss-related processes, which often includes adjusting goals to reflect impending losses such as loss of resources or independence. Thus, although older adulthood is characterized by rapid changes, especially in health, environment, and relationships, lucid dreaming could aid older adults in adapting to new situations, finding solutions to relevant problems, and gaining a greater sense of self.

Due to physiological changes that occur later in life, older adults typically have lower dream recall and shorter periods of REM sleep (Brink, 1977). However, dream therapy in which dream content is analyzed has been used successfully with older adults (Brink, 1977). As stated earlier, dream recall and REM cycles are contributing factors in the ability to lucid dream, so the question arises about whether older adults would be able to lucid dream at all. Funkhouser, Hirsbrunner, Cornu, and Bahro (1999) suggest that the decreased dream recall in older adulthood could have more to do with motivation and attitudes toward dreaming rather than inability.

In a study on dreaming among the elderly, researchers asked college students and older adults questions about their views on dreaming, such as if better dream recall would be desirable and if they try to remember their dreams on a regular basis. Older adults were found to think much less about dreaming than their younger counterparts, and this was correlated with lower dream recall frequency (Funkhouser, Hirsbrunner, Cornu, & Bahro, 1999). Because dream recall improves with intention, this suggests that lower dream recall in older adulthood has more to do with a lack of interest and motivation. When older adults are asked to keep a dream journal or reflect on dreams during the day, their dream recall rate is similar to younger individuals (Brink, 1977). However, there is little research in this area, so greater investigation would need to be undertaken to determine any positive effects of lucid dreaming in older adulthood.

Some researchers are also beginning to believe that lucid dreaming could assist in the rehabilitation of motor disorders. According to Mota-Rolim and Araujo (2013), being capable of performing imaginary movements during a lucid dream could influence actual motor skills during the wake state. Research has shown that repeated imagination of muscle contraction can increase muscular strength and improve learning of motor skills (Mota-Rolim & Araujo, 2013). Lucid dreaming is associated with more brain activity than daytime imagination, so it is not unreasonable to suggest that it would have an even greater benefit than imagination alone. This suggests that lucid dreaming is not only beneficial for mental improvement, but physical improvement as well. However, these findings are preliminary and this application requires more exploration before it can be validated.

Additionally, lucid dreaming has the potential to provide insight into certain mental conditions, such as schizophrenia. According to the European Science Foundation (2009), “lucid dreaming creates distinct patterns of electrical activity in the brain that have similarities to the

patterns made by psychotic conditions such as schizophrenia” (para. 2). Some researchers believe that psychosis occurs when the dissociative state characteristic of dreaming bleeds into waking life. When this occurs, individuals experience hallucinations or paranoid delusions that are more typical of a dreaming state (European Science Foundation, 2009). Thus, studying these patterns and how they affect individuals with mental illness could lead to an increased understanding of conditions involving psychosis.

Because many researchers believe that lucid dreaming is an altered state of consciousness related to metacognition, it could also be helpful in studying similar reported phenomenon. Areas for possible research include sleep paralysis, chemically altered states through the use of psychedelic drugs, hypnosis, psychosis, coma, and near-death experiences (Mota-Rolim & Araujo, 2013). Brain activity recorded while lucid dreaming is similar to that during many of these phenomena, so further research could elucidate the mystery surrounding these topics (Kahan & LaBerge, 1994). However, most of the items on this list are considered pseudosciences and are not given the scientific attention that they deserve. Many of these occurrences are physiologically and psychologically testable, and more focus should be placed in this area. This leads to the next section of this thesis: anecdotal literature.

Anecdotal Literature

Although the scientific community has begun to acknowledge lucid dreaming as a real human ability, the New Age world of parapsychology is bursting with information about this topic. In this section, the phrase *anecdotal literature* refers to any information on lucid dreaming that does not come from a peer-reviewed, scientific source. Most of these sources come from websites, magazine/newspaper articles, and self-help books. Unlike the traditional research literature, which is focused on measurable benefits, the anecdotal literature places a strong focus

on the spiritual and personal benefits of lucid dreaming. In this section, I provide examples of the anecdotal benefits of lucid dreaming in order to create a holistic understanding of the phenomenon.

Many of the anecdotally reported benefits of lucid dreaming are similar to the researched benefits. In an article published in the *Townsend Letter*, a magazine that examines alternative medicine, the author purports that lucid dreaming provides those with physical limitations, such as the elderly or prisoners, with an unlimited freedom of movement that is not possible during waking life (Johnston, 2014). In addition, Johnston believes that lucid dreaming could improve many physical conditions by consciously focusing on the problem while dreaming. This is supported by the Buddhist belief that suggestions made while dreaming are more effective than waking suggestions (Johnston, 2014). Individuals have found links between lucid dreaming and religion, including Buddhism. In fact, individuals hoping to achieve an advanced state of consciousness and enlightenment may utilize lucid dreaming. The practice of Tibetan dream yoga, for example, aims to tap into a lucid dream state to complete certain tasks and goals. These tasks could include visiting different planes and worlds, communicating with enlightened beings, and gaining a deeper understanding of one's own unconscious mind (Turner, 2008a). In the spiritual world, lucid dreaming is viewed as a way to experience personal growth and to grow closer to enlightenment.

Lucid dreaming has also been reported to have healing effects for different health ailments, including cancer. In his narrative article, Hagood (2006) describes how the practice of shamanic dream incubation cured his prostate cancer. While skepticism is almost inevitable in this type of situation, the practice of dream incubation is widespread. To incubate a dream, Hagood focused on his problem (cancer) and then let himself drift into a dream. Afterwards,

Hagood analyzed his dream and then determined what he needed to do in future dreams to exact change. By entering into a lucid state while dreaming, Hagood was able to interact with the dream environment to create the healing effect that he desired. While it is impossible to retroactively determine whether lucid dreaming actually cured Hagood's cancer or if it was due to an outside factor, his account demonstrates that lucid dreaming increases the amount of perceived control an individual has in a situation.

The topic of inducing lucid dreams has received considerable attention from the online lucid dreaming community. Although lucid dreaming is a skill that can be learned, some individuals have more difficulty entering a lucid state than others. Some individuals, believing there is a link between certain kinds of neurotransmitters and lucid dreaming, have turned to external methods of lucid dream induction through dietary supplements that boost production of these neurotransmitters during REM sleep (Yuschak, 2006). While advocates of these supplements claim that there are no adverse health benefits, an air of caution still exists around this issue in the scientific community. Other sources recommend wearing a sleeping mask to balance circadian rhythms by blocking out light, which could result in more time in REM sleep. There are numerous masks and goggles developed specifically for lucid dreaming that use methods such as light exposure and alpha and beta waves (Turner, 2008b).

By examining the scientific and anecdotal findings related to lucid dreaming, I have gained an overall understanding of its place in society. Regardless of lucid dreaming's mainstream popularity, the lucid dreaming community is extensive, and there is an abundance of information about the practice. Many who have experienced lucid dreaming firsthand strongly believe in its ability to improve one's life, and the scientific research supports this idea. For example, a blog dedicated to reporting scientific research about the mind describes the benefits

of lucid dreaming as including improved problem-solving skills and intuition (Dean, 2014).

Although many accounts of lucid dreaming may seem exaggerated or selective, the literature demonstrates that lucid dreaming is perceived by many to have beneficial effects that can translate into waking life.

Personal Experiences

After examining the various literature, both scientific and anecdotal, on lucid dreaming, we now have a more holistic understanding of its therapeutic benefits. However, one cannot truly grasp the essence of lucid dreaming unless he or she has undergone the experience. In this section, I will attempt to describe my own experiences with lucid dreaming and then examine how these experiences compare to the research. On average, I experience one lucid dream per week, meaning that I am a frequent lucid dreamer by research standards (Kahan & LaBerge, 1994). Accounts are based on entries from my dream journal, and only entries that described a lucid dream occurrence (as opposed to a non-lucid dream) were considered for inclusion in this thesis. Only entries from 2013 or later were included, as the first mention of the word *lucid dream* did not appear in my journal until 2013. As mentioned previously, this is because I was not explicitly aware of what lucid dreaming was until my junior year of college. By analyzing journal entries and comparing them to the research, I hope to paint a picture of the lucid dreaming experience and advocate for its use in a therapeutic setting.

Overall, my lucid dreaming experience has led to positive changes in my waking and dreaming states. At the beginning of this thesis, I related my experience with nightmares and the effect that they had on my sleep. While it is easy to scoff at a nightmare during the daytime, anyone who has woken up drenched in sweat and heart racing can attest to the true fear associated with these night terrors. Although my nightmare frequency seemed to decrease as I

got older, I still experienced at least two or three nightmares a month before my interest in lucid dreaming was established. Once I realized that the ability to wake myself during a nightmare was considered a basic form of lucidity, I became curious about what else I could do in my dreams. As someone who often starts sentences with, “In this article I just read,” I made it my mission to read as much as I possibly could about lucid dreaming.

My search inevitably led me to the works of Stephen LaBerge, one of the most prominent and well-respected names in the scientific study of lucid dreaming. Through his works, I began utilizing my own version of the reflection-intention technique, which was developed by LaBerge and Rheingold in 1990. Throughout the day, I perform various mental checks in which I ask myself whether I am dreaming or awake. To make sure that I am actually awake, I check the clock multiple times to ensure that it is passing in a normal way. In dreams, the time on clocks will often change randomly. Once I am certain that I am awake, I say to myself, “I am awake.” Then, I decide what I want to do when I become lucid in a dream and I imagine myself doing it. Examples of this could be deciding to take off in flight once I achieve lucidity, and then actually imagining myself flying.

This entire process is intended to increase the likelihood of having a lucid dream by creating habits. By testing my state multiple times throughout the day, I am more likely to do the same thing while dreaming. In my experience, this technique has been extremely helpful in increasing lucid dream frequency. In many of my dreams, I have become lucid because I suddenly asked myself if I was awake or dreaming. Because the dream state has many differences from the waking state, this often triggers my awareness that I am indeed dreaming, which then allows me to become fully lucid. However, one struggle that accompanies lucid dreaming is the ability to remain lucid. Once I become lucid during a dream, I often become so

excited that I forget to focus on the dream and I either wake up or drift into a non-lucid dream. LaBerge & DeGracia (2000) have addressed this issue thoroughly and recommend various techniques to prolong lucidity. This is why setting a lucid dream intention while awake is so important; setting an intention allows dreamers to focus on that goal instead of getting lost in the limitless possibilities of the dream.

Once I sufficiently trained myself to have frequent lucid dreams that were longer in duration, I decided to overcome my nightmares using lucid dreaming. Most of my nightmares involve being chased, usually by people or things that have the purpose of harming me. I had read numerous accounts of people who had used lucid dreaming to confront their nightmare, so this is what I set out to do. The first time that I successfully took control of a nightmare was on March 5, 2014, and the following is a summary based on my journal entry from this date.

In this dream, I was alone in a dimly lit area that had a door directly across from me. I sensed that something sinister was about to come in, and it was at this point that I realized I was dreaming. For a brief moment, I considered waking myself up to avoid the dreaded nightmare. However, I then recalled my waking intention of confronting my nightmare and decided to remain in the dream. I felt a lot of apprehension at this point; the sensation was one of readiness mixed with fear and excitement.

Seconds after I became lucid, a figure ran into the room towards me. This figure was a human male in appearance but its eyes looked very wrong. Where a normal person would have pupils surrounded by the iris, this figure only had black holes that seemed to change in shape and size as I looked on. The sight of this figure made my entire being well up with fear and panic, and I felt myself losing my confidence. Armed with the knowledge that it was only a

dream, however, I fought my instinct to wake up or run away and, instead, ran straight towards my attacker. At the same time, I consciously focused my thoughts on changing the figure into something less threatening. For some reason, my boyfriend's face came to mind at this point, so I focused on trying to make my boyfriend appear in its place. When it seemed like this creature and I would inevitably crash headfirst into each other, he abruptly stopped inches away from me. He was so close that it was difficult to make out the details of his face anymore, and I experienced another pang of fear from his proximity.

At this point, I realized that I had succeeded in slightly changing the appearance of the figure. He now had blonde hair and resembled my boyfriend, although the transformation was not completely successful. As the figure continued to stand in front of me, I realized that I was no longer in any harm, and I decided to merely walk away and find something else to do. It was as if my fear had evaporated, and I understood that everything around me, including the figure, was a creation of my own mind. After I began to walk away, my lucidity faded, and I drifted into a non-lucid dream that I had no memory of the next day.

This account aligns with the previously-discussed research on many levels. First, my experience demonstrates that the reflection-intention technique is effective in my own experience for inducing a lucid dream state. Because I had been practicing this technique during the day, I was able to remember the intention for my nightmare and then act on that intention while dreaming. This account also demonstrates that memory of waking life remains intact in lucid dreams. The most significant result of this account is its success in facing a nightmare. In this dream, I was able to face the source of my terror and eliminate the fear associated with it. Upon waking from this dream, I felt intense feelings of pride for successfully facing my fear. I also

gained a significant amount of confidence in my ability to recreate this experience in future nightmares. I have had multiple successes in facing nightmares since this dream occurred, with similar results each time. Now, more than a year later, I have not had any nightmares in more than three months, and I am no longer afraid of the dark. If my experiences are generalizable to others, then this could have huge implications for the use of lucid dreaming in the treatment of nightmares and other fear-based situations.

While the elimination of nightmares has been the main benefit that I have gained from lucid dreaming, I have also experienced spiritual benefits similar to those described in the anecdotal research section of this thesis. Growing up, I never considered myself a spiritual person because my family did not attend church. However, I did grow up with the understanding that there was a higher being, and my time in college has led me to delve into my own spiritual beliefs. During this time, I read multiple accounts by individuals who promoted lucid dreaming as a way to learn more about consciousness and reality. Because dreams are created completely by our own minds, many believe that dreams offer a glimpse into the subconscious that would otherwise only be achievable through chemical means, such as psychedelic drugs. Some individuals use their lucid dreams to ask themselves deep questions, such as “What is my purpose in life?” Because the dream is controlled by our own minds, the dreamer will sometimes be given answers or insights that can lead to life transformation. This aspect of lucid dreaming greatly interested me, but I was slightly skeptical since I had not experienced this type of transformative dream myself.

On September 24, 2014, I experienced a lucid dream that changed my entire perspective on consciousness. Prior to this incident, I decided that instead of trying to control my dream, I would let my lucid dream lead me in whatever direction it chose. During the day, I completed

my usual reflection-intention technique of checking my state and setting my intention, which was to envision a door during my lucid dream and then go through it without any expectations of what would be on the other side. This is a technique that many lucid dreamers utilize when they want to have a more meaningful lucid dream experience. On the night of September 24, I was able to become lucid while dreaming and recall my intention from the day:

Once I realized that I was dreaming, my boyfriend appeared before me and asked what I wanted to see. I told him to show me anything, so he took my hand and led me through the doorway. On the other side of the door was an incredibly dreamy landscape: it was as if we were running through clouds tinged with the colors of sunrise. As we ran through this area, I realized that I was no longer holding my boyfriend's hand. I looked over and had this overwhelming feeling that the figure running next to me was myself. I recall feeling an interesting combination between euphoria and fear. I was blissfully happy in this moment, but I also felt as if my human brain could not fully comprehend what was happening.

Soon after this, I found myself in a room with five or six other people. As I approached the group, one of the figures stood up and walked over, as if he wanted to speak with me. I asked if he wanted to tell me something, and he led me to a table where the other figures were seated. This male, along with another female dream person, proceeded to give me some of the strangest advice I have ever received: "Stop pooping on yourself." Yes, this sounds crazy. Yes, it is the greatest advice I have ever received. Although I was shocked by what the dream figure said, I instantly knew that it was a metaphor for something.

At this point, I sat down at the table with the dream people around me and tried to figure out what they were attempting to convey. I knew that their message was important to my life, but

I also knew they were not going to come right out and tell me what I needed to know. Dream people seldom do. I made a few surmises about the meaning of their words, but I knew I was not quite getting it.

The dream ended when I was talking to a dream woman about how I might be suppressing myself a lot of the time. As she was talking to me, I remember seeing the other dream people out of the corner of my eye and they were moving around very quickly. It was kind of like in a video game when there is a glitch and the characters are moving in a weird, chaotic fashion. This actually scared me a bit because it was so chaotic and made me feel very uncomfortable. Because I was scared, I decided to wake myself up. Usually I can do this relatively easily by forcing myself to open my eyes, but it actually took a little longer than usual this time. As I was trying to wake myself up, I remember telling the dream woman that I was leaving. She seemed sad or disappointed about this, and said something like, "Yes, I can feel it disappearing." Then I woke up and was happily freaking out because I had such an illuminating lucid dream.

Looking back on this dream, I cannot get the words out of my head: "Stop pooping on yourself." I have thought about this a lot, and I think that their words have a few different meanings. When I think about all of the problems I have in my life right now, I realize that I am the cause of almost all of them. I have a bad habit of selling myself short or creating difficult situations for myself. For example, I often procrastinate to the point that it becomes a significant problem that causes me stress. I think part of what they were trying to tell me was to stop being my own reason for failing. If I fail, I should be able to say that I did everything in my power to make things better for myself. Another possible interpretation of what they were saying is that I

am often trying to force things in my life instead of just letting it be. There are times that I try to be something I am not, like when I try to force conversation with someone that I am not very comfortable with. I am learning that if I am not being myself, I am not improving at all or doing myself any favors. When I try to be someone I am not, I only make myself more miserable.

While the exact meaning of this dream has little relevance to anyone but myself, my experience demonstrates the true power of lucid dreaming. This is probably the most impactful dream I have ever had, and the advice I received is always in the back of my head. What made this experience so special was its applicability to my life. Even though the dream figure's words were clouded in metaphor, I instantly knew that they were speaking from the deepest recesses of my being. The dream figures appeared distinct from myself, but I know that they were actually the personification of my subconscious mind. This is why the advice carries even more weight in my life. Who knows my situation better than myself? Lucid dreaming gives us the opportunity to learn from ourselves, and that is why it has been so impactful in so many lives. While my experience is certainly not generalizable to the entire population, it does demonstrate how lucid dreaming can promote personal growth and self-reflection.

Recommendations

After reviewing the research and anecdotal literature on lucid dreaming, as well as my own experiences with this subject, I have a series of recommendations for future research and clinical practice. First and foremost, there is a great need for more research on the use of lucid dreaming as a therapeutic tool. Based on my understanding of lucid dreaming, I believe that it could be used to treat a variety of conditions: PTSD, nightmares, schizophrenia, Borderline Personality Disorder, etc. Lucid dreaming can also be used for general life improvement because it increases self-confidence and expands the scope of human ability. One of the greatest aspects

of lucid dreaming is that almost anyone can be trained to do it, so its rewards are potentially far-reaching.

However, before it can be used in the treatment of various conditions, lucid dreaming should undergo rigorous testing. Dream research continues to be constrained by the outdated view that dreaming cognition is fundamentally different from waking cognition (Kahan & LaBerge, 1994). Earlier views of dreams focus solely on the deficits in cognitive functioning that occur while dreaming and describe dreaming as being a dissociative state that is inferior to waking cognition (Paulsson & Parker, 2006). Lucid dreaming, however, questions all of these long-held beliefs about dreaming and points to the idea that consciousness actually exists on a spectrum (LaBerge & DeGracia, 2000). Waking and dreaming cognition have many similarities, as do lucid and non-lucid dreams. The concept of lucid dreaming is a spectrum in itself because dreamers can experience varying degrees of lucidity (LaBerge & DeGracia, 2000). If further research on dreams is undertaken, researchers must view dreams from a strengths-based perspective. Ultimately, more research needs to be done on the nature of lucid dreaming and its relationship to other states of consciousness.

In order for lucid dreaming to be considered a viable form of therapy, more empirically based evaluations on the effectiveness of different lucid dreaming techniques must also be established (Paulsson & Parker, 2006). There are countless techniques for inducing and prolonging a lucid dream, and these need to be evaluated to determine the most effective techniques for use in therapy. A large majority of the current research on lucid dreaming relies on subjects' abilities to self-report dream content. While these reports can be extremely illuminating, they are also subjective to each individual's unique experience. LaBerge (1985) examined subjects' lucid dreams through physiological measures, such as by having subjects

deliberately make certain eye signals during a lucid dream and then recording the physiological effects that occur as a result of the dreamt eye movement. By using these methods, LaBerge (1985) determined that actions performed in lucid dreams can be physiologically verified in a sleep study, and that time passes similarly in a lucid dream as in real life. More research of this caliber needs to be conducted, with a strong focus on the reapeable benefits of lucid dreaming.

Concluding Thoughts

Lucid dreaming is an ideal tool for self-improvement and exploration because it allows individuals to search their own mind for solutions. Unlike pharmacological interventions, lucid dreaming has no adverse side effects. In addition, it promotes self-reliance and problem solving skills instead of reliance on drugs or external aids. Based on the current literature, lucid dreaming has the possibility to be used in a clinical setting with a variety of populations. Because it promotes autonomy and resilience, lucid dreaming treatment may result in increased benefits in a shorter amount of time than traditional types of therapy. Lucid dreaming teaches individuals to solve problems using their own thoughts and will power, and this holds enormous implications for its future clinical uses. I have examined my own experiences with lucid dreaming and found them to be in accordance with the research and anecdotal literature. Based on these findings, I advocate for further research in this area with the goal of creating a standardized program for lucid dreaming therapy. Lucid dreaming has the potential to transform lives, and it is time to harness that power to positively affect dreamers everywhere.

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